New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 12 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of June 1, 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Me and Juliet"

The New York Times
May 29, 1953

'Me and Juliet' Is a Valentine to the Theatre by Rodgers and Hammerstein

By BROOKS ATKINSON

When Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hammerstein make up their minds what they are writing about, "Me and Juliet," which opened at the Majestic last evening, may turn out to be an enjoyable show. This is their Valentine to show business, expressed in the form of a show-within-a-show; and it has just about everything except an intelligible story.

Mr. Rodgers has written one of his most melodious scores in the endless variety of form that makes him a musician. "No Other Love," the theme-song of this production, has the warmth and richness of his most popular work. But his ode to the mysterious indomitability of an audience — "The Big, Black Giant"—is his most original song. Doubtless it expresses his own respect for the real king of show business. The score includes other good numbers, all of which have been vigorously orchestrated by Don Walker. Presumably he is also the man who has made the ballet-music so trenchant and exciting.

You can count a good many other blessings on the stage. It would be hard to collect a more attractive cast than one that includes Isabel Bigley, a belle that is still ringing beautifully; Joan McCracken at the top of her form as a comic dancer; Bill Hayes as a disarming assistant stage manager and Ray Walston, who gives another incisive performance with comic overtones. You can keep right on naming other delightful actors in a cast that George Abbott has set on its toes. "Me and Juliet" is populated with nothing but thoroughbreds.

Score several decisive victories also for Robert Alton, who has done the ballets in the flashy style prescribed by the story. Since you already know what Jo Mielziner can do when he settles down to his drawing-board, you need not be told that his travelogue through backstage, the theatre alley, manager's office and smoking-room shines with special magic. And Irene Sharaff has designed carnival costumes extravagantly. "Me and Juliet" looks better than a million dollars: it is gayer and more entrancing.

Sooner or later, however, we have to face the fact that the form of Mr. Hammerstein's backstage legend is cumbersome. None of the fine items in a gifted show can quite break through the elaborate heaviness of the story. "Me and Juliet" is intended to chronicle the backstage life of a successful musical show that has already settled down to a run. It involves romance as well as professional temperament; and it is obviously written by a man in love with his profession and full of sentiment about the people of the stage.

* * *

Even in the happiest of circumstances the play-within-a-play poses a difficult problem in craftsmanship. Mr. Hammerstein has complicated it by shifting back and forth repeatedly and separating the material into very small pieces. Although the content of the story is romantic and attractive, the form is unwieldy and verbose.

All the captivating things everyone loves in a Rodgers and Hammerstein show struggle in "Me and Juliet" with a book that has no velocity. To tell the truth, "Me and Juliet" looks a little like a rehearsal—beautiful, talented, full of good things but still disorganized. As the tired sages of show business invariably remark as though one phrase could solve everything: "It needs work."

"ME AND JULIET"

Musical comedy with music by Richard Rodgers; book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d; staged by George Abbott; settings by Jo Mielziner; dances by Robert Alton; costumes by Irene Sharaff; presented by Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein at the Majestic Theatre, May 28, 1953. The cast:

George.....Randy Hall
Sidney.....Edwin Philips
Jeanie.....Isabel Bigley
Herbie.....Jackie Kelk
Chris.....Barbara Carroll
Milton.....Herb Wasserman
Stu.....Joe Shulman
Michael.....Michael King
Bob.....Mark Dawson
Larry.....Bill Hayes
Mac.....Ray Walston
Monica.....Patty Ann Jackson
Ruby.....Joe Lautner
Charlie (Me).....Arthur Maxwell
Dario.....George S. Irving
Lily (Juliet).....Helena Scott
Jim (Don Juan).....Bob Fortier
Susie (Carmen)..Svetlana McLee
Voice of Mr. Harrison.....
Henry Hamilton
Voice of Miss Davenport.....
Deborah Remsen
Hilda.....Norma Thornton
Marcia.....Thelma Tadlock
Betty.....Joan McCracken
Buzz.....Buzz Miller
Ralph.....Ralph Linn
Miss Oxford.....Gwen Harmon
Sadie.....Francine Bond
Mildred....Lorraine Havercroft
A Theatre Patron.....
Barbara Lee Smith
Another Theatre Patron.....
Susan Lovell

Daily Mirror
May 29, 1953

New R. & H. Musical Opens At the Majestic

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Having set new high standards for musicals throughout the world with such clicks as "Oklahoma!," "Carousel," "South Pacific" and "The King and I," Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein dipped into the lower drawer of their desk for a song-and-dancer called "Me and Juliet."

IT ARRIVED AT the Majestic Theatre last evening under their managerial auspices. It proved a big disappointment for this dyed-in-the-wool R.&H. fan. Had it been penned and composed by a team of tyros named Joe Smith and Harold Jones, we would probably write this morning that it was a fair start, showing promise of sorts.

But coming from the atelier of the masters, it was, to put it kindly, incredible. We kept saying over and over to ourselves: "Dick Rodgers and Oc Hammerstein didn't do it. They couldn't have done it. They'd have taken this one off in Boston for revamping. They would eventually have brought in a smash."

"Me and Juliet" is a pedestrian musical. It has to do with a nice little chorus girl who falls in love with a nice little stage manager, and has a big, jealous bully of an electrician try to send them into another world via drunken fists and sandbags. But you know as well as we do that by the final curtain's fall, there was a happy ending for the young romantics.

* * *

GEORGE ABBOTT, who in his time has given us many a top-flight eye-and-ear show, has staged the book for all it's worth. Jo Mielziner has designed acceptable sets, and Irene Sharaff fair-to-middling costumes. Dance director Robert Alton comes off best of the lot with his choreograhpy which, if not exactly dazzling, is okay.

Isabel Bigley is pretty as a picture, and sings like a nightingale as the love-smitten chorister. Bill Hayes is personable and likable as her harassed boy friend. Joan McCracken, in a costume borrowed from a Tonkinese sing-song girl and a dude rancher, is as attractive as her part permits.

Mark Lawson is swell as the swaggering electrician, displaying an excellent voice and plenty of muscles. Ray Walston, Jackie Kelk, Edwin Philips and Arthur Maxwell are good in other assignments.

* * *

ALL RIGHT, the book was dull and minus laughs. The score struck us as being mediocre Rodgers and Hammerstein. Radio, record and nitery bands may prove us wrong. For a lot of the customers were humming "Keep It Gay," "The Big, Black Giant," "No Other Love" and "I'm Your Girl" as they exited.

But they don't represent the kind of lyrics and music that we want to keep on our permanent disc shelf. They don't belong beside the albums of previous R. & H. successes. They're the sort of chansons that are easy to forget.

Dick Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein have done more than any others in the past to advance the musical comedy form. Their triumphs have won universal admiration. We owe them a lot. So it isn't pleasant to tell you this morning that "Me and Juliet" is a mistake.

Journal American

May 29, 1953

Below Par Job By Great Team

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE GREAT team of Rodgers and Hammerstein, having established themselves as the best book-and-music boys in the business, hit a slight snag last night at the Majestic Theatre when they presented their latest effort, "Me And Juliet." It's by no means inferior, and it'll be a hit—but it should have been so much better.

In my ringside recordings the fault would lie partly with Oscar Hammerstein 2d, for a story which lacked style and excitement, and partly to both partners for an uninspired job of casting.

That the whole evening didn't go down the drain can be attributed to a first class score by Richard Rodgers (and Hammerstein), and to the constantly frantic talents of Jo Mielziner, who provided the settings, and Robert Alton who, as usual, turned in a superlative job with the dance numbers.

Against this there was the fact that no new names loomed on the horizon—even the old ones had appeared under more favorable auspices elsewhere—the book languished in a series of mild and familiar episodes, and there were few lusty laughs.

A first night audience which had come to tear the chairs out of the floor remained in polite and respectful silence until the final curtain.

Maybe Hammerstein made a mistake in trying to do a big musical with the familiar play-within-a-play formula, for it is difficult to make things hold still for all the plot development necessary.

During the first act there are long arid moments when people are singing songs and bending each other's ears in a rather confusing effort to get the audience oriented.

And once it is established that a girl in the show (Isabel Bigley) has been the girl of an electrician (Mark Dawson), but is about to find her true love in the Assistant Stage Manager (Bill Hayes) a lot of time has elapsed and there is slight doubt, or interest, in how everything will turn out.

But then Mielziner throws some truly ingenious and decorative stage tricks at you (to effect the dissolve from the real to the fake show); Alton puts the boys and girls through some of his prettiest paces; there is a quite amusing bit between the show's lead (Arthur Maxwell) and the orchestra leader (George Irving); and Rodgers' lovely tunes begin to creep into your heart.

So it goes through most of the proceedings, singularly routine story stuff enlivened by either production numbers like "Marriage Type Love," "No Other Love," skillful dancing by Bob Fortier and Joan McCracken, the brittle "Intermission Talk" by most of the company, or the decorative within-the-play numbers from the within-the-cast cast.

We are all aware of the charm and vocal aptitudes of Miss Bigley, there is not the slightest doubt that Joan McCracken can dance and sing and read a funny line, and Bill Hayes is a capable and engaging juvenile.

Jackie Kelk can be very funny, Mark Dawson is a lumbering "heavy" with a fine voice and Roy Walston has endless abilities in both comedy and straight drama. Many others in the cast are equally gifted.

But it seems they have been given little new or notable to do and, in the absence of this, have not been provided with the services of an Ezio Pinza, a Roz Russell, a Mary Martin, or a Yul Brynner to carry the load.

Sorry, Messrs. R. & H., you'll probably make another mint with this one — but you shouldn't. Not up to par.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 29, 1953

'Me and Juliet' Dares Tradition

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

One of the most exciting things about Rodgers and Hammerstein as a creative team in the theater is that they never repeat themselves. In "Me and Juliet" they have copied nobody at all, and the resultant novelty is often a fascinating use of theater.

What they have aimed at is to tell the story of a big musical, giving it the leading role. The action flashes back and forth, and in and out, like a very fluid X ray. You are behind the scenes one moment, at rehearsal, in the manager's office, up on the electrician's balcony above the stage, or just sitting in the audience watching the "show," which is the real heroine of "Me and Juliet."

Story Shallow.

Sometimes you will think they have bitten off more than anybody alive could chew. So that nothing will distract the attention due the "show," there is a great shallow splash of story. The action has so many places to go and so much to establish that it is a long time before anything reaches out and really "sends" you.

The first major lift for me was when Bill Hayes as an assistant stage manager rehearses Isabel Bigley as a chorus girl in a song that makes them fall in love. And the first hearty comedy was a primed rehearsal between Joan McCracken as a dancer and Ray Walston as the stage manager, whose heart she is out to get for good.

When things move on, try as everybody might, the "show" loses out to the people. The Bigley-Hayes triangle with Mark Dawson as a red tempered electrician becomes wild melodrama, which deserves more heroics than it gets for its resolution. Miss McCracken gets her prey, not by prowess but by luck.

Little Glamour Here.

The reason most backstage stories are fascinating is that they seem glamorous. This one rarely does. People in the theater incline to be indignantly sensitive and proud about whatever they appear in. The "show" here inspires nobody.

This "musical" the excitement is all about is a weak copy of some very ordinary extravaganzas. It is not specifically dated, nor specifically satirical. It is just timelessly superficial, except for some bright dances and some ingenious costumes. Miss Bigley's character doesn't want a better role. She is only in the theater for money. Nobody else cares anything for the "show" and would just as soon quit it any minute.

Now, this may be true of plenty of casts. I would really rather not hear about it. If the theater is going to turn inside out to be realistic about itself it should do so with bitter humor.

Better Movie Script.

The scheme of "Me and Juliet" asks for the fluidity of a movie camera, but demands the operation be in realistic terms. This is simply invading a field which can be conquered more neatly with less strain by the camera itself. Why fight City Hall?

If this is carping, it is so with admiration for the courage to experiment and regret that it does not aim in a happy direction.

The Mielziner scenery is absolutely breathtaking, and the Sharaff costumes have an abandon and wit all their own.

New York Post

May 29, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Rodgers & Hammerstein Backstage

There is no escaping the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein are not at the top of their distinguished form in their new musical play, "Me and Juliet," which opened at the Majestic last night. This melancholy truth brings up a highly debatable question. Is the latest work of the men who have given the popular American musical theater such excitement and importance disappointing merely because it doesn't live up to the high standard its creators have set for themselves? Or are we made to think it is somewhat better than it actually is because we read into it our memories of the previous achievements of its eminent authors?

Not even such theatrical experts as Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d can be counted upon always to give us masterpieces, and, if "Me and Juliet" is far from a peak achievement, it still has its pleasant virtues. For one thing, it isn't a bore. It is lively, vigorous and filled with the showmanlike craftsmanship of its makers. It has, of course, a number of attractive songs, its lyrics are bright and intelligent and sung so that you can understand them. It is good-looking and ingeniously mounted, and its cast is made up of attractive singing actors who always know what they are up to in their playing.

Show Within Show

These are commendable qualities, and they are assuredly not to be ignored. But for all the creative professionalism of the new show, there is a curious and surprising air of the commonplace hanging ominously over the evening. "Me and Juliet" is a backstage story, with the action taking place in a theater during the performance of a musical comedy, and those shows within shows do present a handicap. For one thing, the authors have to give us not one good show but two, since both the play that is actually being presented and the one that its characters are supposed to be staging have to be properly entertaining.

This, I think, is one of the failures of "Me and Juliet." A number of the scenes are given of the musical comedy that the players are staging during the course of the plot, and none of them manages to suggest that the show within the show has any degree of merit. As for the central backstage story, Mr. Hammerstein has provided an amiable melodrama about a jealous electrician who tries to break up a romance between the girl understudy and the assistant stage manager, and he tries rather handsomely to avoid the cliches of such tales. For example, the understudy goes on for the star only during a rehearsal. But it doesn't quite work out.

The Songs

The narrative is at its best, not during its plot manipulations, but in the wry incidental comments on actors, producers and audiences that have been knowingly injected into the proceedings from time to time. Incidentally, the plot might have been resolved quickly if the stage manager had just called a cop when the vengeful electrician started dropping sandbags on his rival. As for the music, I doubt if it represents Mr. Rodgers at his best, but it is, of course, unfailingly tuneful, and there are several songs, such as "No Other Love," "Keep It Gay," "Marriage Type Love" and "The Big, Black Giant" that are especially pleasant.

As the understudy, Isabel Bigley, the memorable heroine of "Guys and Dolls," again reveals that she is one of the loveliest of the younger musical comedy actresses. Ray Walston, always a fine actor, makes a real characterization of the tough stage manager who doesn't believe in having a girl in his shows, and Joan McCracken is engaging as the girl he nevertheless acquires. Bill Hayes is pleasant as the romantic assistant stage manager, and Mark Dawson is properly dynamic as the maddened electrician. George S. Irving has a good bit as an orchestra leader who thinks he has an admirer in the audience. But "Me and Juliet" is less than triumphant.

DAILY NEWS

May 29, 1953

'Me and Juliet' a Large, Lavish And Dullish Tribute to Show Biz

BY JOHN CHAPMAN

Rodgers and Hammerstein, who have done so much to improve the American musical comedy stage in the last decade, have written and produced "Me and Juliet" as a tribute to the business they are in —show business. It is a big and beautiful tribute which they presented to a big and beautiful audience early last evening at the Majestic Theatre, where their "South Pacific" flourished for more than four years.

My own enthusiasm for show business leads me to applaud many lovely and miraculous things in "Me and Juliet"—a fabulous scenic scheme by Jo Mielziner, a melody here, a lyric there, a fine Robert Alton dance or two, some notable costumes by Irene Sharaff and a number of attractive principals. Such elements as these, backed by the Rodgers and Hammerstein reputation, should make the musical one of the items on a showgoer's shopping list.

Yet "Me and Juliet" does not strike me as a major R & H work because its story is either too involved or incapable of competing with the remarkable scenic plot. Like "Kiss Me, Kate," it is a backstage yarn—a show within a show; but unlike "Kiss Me, Kate," it lacks a libretto by Shakespeare.

Oscar Hammerstein 2d tells what goes on in and around a theatre where a musical titled "Me and Juliet" is playing, and Richard Rodgers provides pleasant musical accompaniment. The principal story element involves the love of an assistant stage manager for a chorus girl and the drunken jealousy of a burly electrician. There are other elements, such as the affection of a dancing girl for a reluctant stage manager and the misplaced egotism of an orchestra leader, which serve more to confuse than to enlighten. ("Me and Juliet" seems simplest and most enjoyable when it is giving a technical demonstration of how a big musical comedy is put on, from rehearsals to an actual performance.

Scenery Steals Show.

And it is at its most interesting when Mielziner's scenery is in motion, ranging from front to back and top to bottom of a big theatre. There is a first-act chorus dance number, "Keep It Gay," which is sheer wizardry—an instantaneous change from a performance in costume as a paying audience would see it to a backstage rehearsal of this same number with the boys and girls in their practice clothes. Light bridges, "pipes," back walls and a smoking lounge interchange effortlessly with the glamorous curtains and settings a theatre audience sees from its chairs.

Isabel Bigley is pretty and sings prettily as the chorus girl, Bill Hayes is amiable as the assistant stage manager, and Joan McCracken, the dancer, gives out with a sultry voice in a song or two. Mark Dawson, big man with big voice, has the unrewarding role of the jealous electrician, George S. Irving is funny as the orchestra leader, and Ray Walston provides some dry humor as the stage manager.

Rodgers' score, as orchestrated by Don Walker, has lots of brass and bounce, but its melodies have eluded me on first hearing, except for "Keep It Gay" and "Marriage Type Love." And Rodgers and Hammerstein have written a very solemn hymn to the theatre audience, titled "Big Black Giant," which is overstressed. Director George Abbott has performed heroically in keeping this big show moving.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
May 29, 1953

THEATER

'Me and Juliet'

By WALTER F. KERR

AS THE "Me and Juliet" overture rides to a finish, and the Majestic curtain goes up on a warm and duskily lighted backstage, it is clear that Rodgers and Hammerstein's longstanding love affair with the theater is about to break into the open. Instead of training their guns on the customers out front, the town's most skillful showmen have ducked in under the proscenium to shake hands with, and pay a fervent salute to, the boys and girls who make the business tick.

One of the musical's love stories starts on a light-bridge, suspended high above a rehearsing company. Another tees off in the casual agonies of an audition for understudies, with fledgling dancers competing for jobs, a bored director barking orders over a loudspeaker, and an improvised trio meddling with the drums.

Before we are through with this affectionate survey of footlight life, we have been whisked into dressing rooms, allowed to relax in a colorfully dingy alley before curtain-time is called, hurried to the little bar across the street, permitted to rub elbows with the intermission crowd at the candy counter. There's a climactic melee in the manager's office, with ticket stubs flying in all directions, and there's a show-within-a-show, too—an onstage musical comedy called "Me and Juliet."

• • •

Mechanically, the show is pure magic: a proscenium arch slides gently to one side to reveal the prompter's corner; a whirling ensemble of gaily costumed dancers dissolves suddenly into the same frenzy, and what appears to be the same people, in rehearsal clothes.

Musically, it is good basic Rodgers. Rodgers with some of the violins sent home and all of the brass thoroughly roused. If the score doesn't have the emotional weight or the gentle, lilting line of some of the composer's recent romantic journeys, it's because he is trying for something else: for straight musical-comedy verve ("Keep It Gay"), for bright, caustic comment ("Intermission Talk"), for brash, breezy nonsense ("We Deserve Each Other"). And nobody is short-changed on the ballads. "Marriage-Type Love," "No Other Love," and "I'm Your Girl" are all run-of-the-goldmine Rodgers—fresh, sweet, and infinitely singable.

• • •

But, like a lot of lovers bent on declaring their passion, the authors strike a point at which they become tongue-tied. They want to say so much, they want to say it so burstingly, they want to be so sure that no heartfelt endearment is omitted anywhere, that they wind up gasping for breath and making slightly disconnected sounds.

"Me and Juliet" is a dizzying collection of independently attractive fragments, so eager to embrace everything that half its treasures slip through its outstretched arms. The love stories begin winningly, and then, in the scurry, lose individuality and warmth. The show-within-a-show begins in what seems a satirical vein, and then blurs and goes limp in the restless and overly ingenious evening. (This last is quite a serious loss; by failing to whip real gayety, humor and a consistent point of view into the onstage musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein have come perilously close to writing a show-without-a-show).

There are, however, some striking melodramatic effects: a spotlight gone crazy and sweeping into the wings to catch a clandestine couple kissing; a fire-eyed drunk charging through a dance routine; a hulking, silhouetted figure ripping the grillwork from a barred office window.

And there are attractive performances: from lithe Isabel Bigley as an understudy who doesn't want to be a star, from Bill Hayes as the stage manager who is secretly in love with her, from Arthur Maxwell as a temperamental, scene-stealing matinee idol, and from Joan McCracken as a pint-sized, long-legged Amazon.

Most interesting of the acting jobs, though, comes from Ray Walston, a gimlet-eyed, tight-lipped, single-minded backstage tyrant. Mr. Walston has combined genuine characterization and musical-comedy style with enormous felicity, and when he is hiking his belt after a bit of tough talk, or fighting his way offstage amid a hurricane of dancers, he is extremely funny as well.

The Mielziner settings are expert, the George Abbott staging is swift and pointed, the Irene Sharaff costumes are good to look at. Choreographer Robert Alton is at his best when he is inventing a rehearsal impromptu; the "show" dances suffer from the same indecision which mars Mr. Hammerstein's book.

On their own say-so, Rodgers and Hammerstein did this one for "fun." What is curious about the show is that so little of this spirit shines through. "Me and Juliet" seems more deeply in earnest and a lot less lighthearted than their more significant work.